

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most employers prefer graduates of formal programs in medical assisting. Such programs are offered in vocational-technical high schools, postsecondary vocational schools, community and junior colleges, and in colleges and universities. Postsecondary programs usually last either 1 year, resulting in a certificate or diploma, or 2 years, resulting in an associate degree. Courses cover anatomy, physiology, and medical terminology as well as typing, transcription, recordkeeping, accounting, and insurance processing. Students learn laboratory techniques, clinical and diagnostic procedures, pharmaceutical principles, medication administration, and first aid. They study office practices, patient relations, medical law, and ethics. Accredited programs include an internship that provides practical experience in physicians' offices, hospitals, or other healthcare facilities.

Two agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education accredit programs in medical assisting: the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) and the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). In 2001, there were about 500 medical assisting programs accredited by CAAHEP and about 170 accredited by ABHES. The Committee on Accreditation for Ophthalmic Medical Personnel approved 14 programs in ophthalmic medical assisting.

Formal training in medical assisting, while generally preferred, is not always required. Some medical assistants are trained on the job, although this is less common than in the past. Applicants usually need a high school diploma or the equivalent. Recommended high school courses include mathematics, health, biology, typing, bookkeeping, computers, and office skills. Volunteer experience in the healthcare field also is helpful.

Although there is no licensing for medical assistants, some States require them to take a test or a course before they can perform certain tasks, such as taking x rays. Employers prefer to hire experienced workers or certified applicants who have passed a national examination, indicating that the medical assistant meets certain standards of competence. The American Association of Medical Assistants awards the Certified Medical Assistant credential; the American Medical Technologists awards the Registered Medical Assistant credential; the American Society of Podiatric Medical Assistants awards the Podiatric Medical Assistant Certified credential; and the Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology awards credentials at three levels—Certified Ophthalmic Assistant, Certified Ophthalmic Technician, and Certified Ophthalmic Medical Technologist.

Medical assistants may be able to advance to office manager. They may qualify for a variety of administrative support occupations, or may teach medical assisting. Some, with additional education, enter other health occupations such as nursing and medical technology.

Medical assistants deal with the public; therefore, they must be neat and well-groomed and have a courteous, pleasant manner. Medical assistants must be able to put patients at ease and explain physicians' instructions. They must respect the confidential nature of medical information. Clinical duties require a reasonable level of manual dexterity and visual acuity.

Job Outlook

Employment of medical assistants is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2010 as the health services industry expands because of technological advances in medicine, and a growing and aging population. It is one of the fastest growing occupations.

Employment growth will be driven by the increase in the number of group practices, clinics, and other healthcare facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel, particularly the flexible medical

assistant who can handle both administrative and clinical duties. Medical assistants primarily work in outpatient settings, where much faster than average growth is expected.

In view of the preference of many health care employers for trained personnel, job prospects should be best for medical assistants with formal training or experience, particularly those with certification.

Earnings

The earnings of medical assistants vary, depending on experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of medical assistants were \$23,000 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$19,460 and \$27,460 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$16,700, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$32,850 a year. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of medical assistants in 2000 were as follows:

Offices and clinics of medical doctors	\$23,610
Hospitals	22,950
Health and allied services, not elsewhere classified	22,860
Offices of osteopathic physicians	21,420
Offices of other health practitioners	20,860

Related Occupations

Workers in other medical support occupations include dental assistants, medical records and health information technicians, medical secretaries, occupational therapist assistants and aides, pharmacy aides, and physical therapist assistants and aides.

Sources of Additional Information

Information about career opportunities, CAAHEP-accredited educational programs in medical assisting, and the Certified Medical Assistant exam is available from:

► The American Association of Medical Assistants, 20 North Wacker Dr., Suite 1575, Chicago, IL 60606. Internet: <http://www.aama-ntl.org>

Information about career opportunities and the Registered Medical Assistant certification exam is available from:

► Registered Medical Assistants of American Medical Technologists, 710 Higgins Rd., Park Ridge, IL 60068-5765. Internet: <http://www.amt1.com>

For a list of ABHES-accredited educational programs in medical assisting, contact:

► Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, 803 West Broad St., Suite 730, Falls Church, VA 22046. Internet: <http://www.abhes.org>

Information about career opportunities, training programs, and the Certified Ophthalmic Assistant exam is available from:

► Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology, 2025 Woodlane Dr., St. Paul, MN 55125-2995. Internet: <http://www.jcahpo.org>

Information about careers for podiatric assistants is available from:

► American Society of Podiatric Medical Assistants, 2124 S. Austin Blvd., Cicero, IL 60650.

Medical Transcriptionists

(O*NET 31-9094.00)

Significant Points

- Employers prefer medical transcriptionists who have completed a vocational school or community college program.
- Employment is projected to grow faster than average due to increasing demand for medical transcription services.
- Some medical transcriptionists enjoy the flexibility of working at home, especially those with previous experience in a hospital or clinic setting.

Nature of the Work

Medical transcriptionists, also called *medical transcribers* and *medical stenographers*, listen to dictated recordings made by physicians and other healthcare professionals and transcribe them into medical reports, correspondence, and other administrative material. They generally listen to recordings on a special headset, using a foot pedal to pause the recording when necessary, and key the text into a personal computer or word processor, editing as necessary for grammar and clarity. The documents they produce include discharge summaries, history and physical examination reports, operating room reports, consultation reports, autopsy reports, diagnostic imaging studies, and referral letters. Medical transcriptionists return transcribed documents to the dictator for review and signature, or correction. These documents eventually become part of patients' permanent files.

To understand and accurately transcribe dictated reports into a format that is clear and comprehensible for the reader, medical transcriptionists must understand medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, diagnostic procedures, and treatment. They also must be able to translate medical jargon and abbreviations into their expanded forms. To help identify terms appropriately, transcriptionists refer to standard medical reference materials—both printed and electronic; some of these are available over the Internet. Medical transcriptionists must comply with specific standards that apply to the style of medical records, in addition to the legal and ethical requirements involved with keeping patient records confidential.



Transcriptionists use medical reference materials to ensure that medical terms are correctly identified.

Experienced transcriptionists spot mistakes or inconsistencies in a medical report and check back with the dictator to correct the information. Their ability to understand and correctly transcribe patient assessments and treatments reduces the chance of patients receiving ineffective or even harmful treatments and ensures high quality patient care.

Currently, most healthcare providers transmit dictation to medical transcriptionists using either digital or analog dictating equipment. With the emergence of the Internet, some transcriptionists receive dictation over the Internet and are able to quickly return transcribed documents to clients for approval. As confidentiality concerns are resolved, this practice will become more prevalent. Another emerging trend is the implementation of speech recognition technology, which electronically translates sound into text and creates drafts of reports. Reports are then formatted; edited for mistakes in translation, punctuation, or grammar; and checked for consistency and possible medical errors. Transcriptionists working in specialized areas with more standard terminology, such as radiology or pathology, are more likely to encounter speech recognition technology. However, use of speech recognition technology will become more widespread as the technology becomes more sophisticated.

Medical transcriptionists who work in physicians' offices and clinics may have other office duties, such as receiving patients, scheduling appointments, answering the telephone, and handling incoming and outgoing mail. Medical secretaries, discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*, may also transcribe as part of their jobs. Court reporters, also discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*, have similar duties, but with a different focus. They take verbatim reports of speeches, conversations, legal proceedings, meetings, and other events when written accounts of spoken words are necessary for correspondence, records, or legal proof.

Working Conditions

The majority of these workers are employed in comfortable settings, such as hospitals, physicians' offices, clinics, laboratories, medical libraries, government medical facilities, or at home. An increasing number of medical transcriptionists telecommute from home-based offices as employees or subcontractors for hospitals and transcription services or as self-employed independent contractors.

Work in this occupation presents few hazards, although sitting in the same position for long periods can be tiring, and workers can suffer wrist, back, neck, or eye problems due to strain and risk repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. The pressure to be accurate and fast also can be stressful.

Many medical transcriptionists work a standard 40-hour week. Self-employed medical transcriptionists are more likely to work irregular hours—including part time, evenings, weekends, or on an on-call basis.

Employment

Medical transcriptionists held about 102,000 jobs in 2000. About 2 out of 5 worked in hospitals and about another 2 out of 5 in physicians' offices and clinics. Others worked for laboratories, colleges and universities, transcription services, and temporary help agencies.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Employers prefer to hire transcriptionists who have completed postsecondary training in medical transcription, offered by many vocational schools, community colleges, and distance-learning programs. Completion of a 2-year associate degree or 1-year certificate program—including coursework in anatomy, medical terminology, medicolegal issues, and English grammar and

punctuation—is highly recommended, but not always required. Many of these programs include supervised on-the-job experience. Some transcriptionists, especially those already familiar with medical terminology due to previous experience as a nurse or medical secretary, become proficient through on-the-job training.

The American Association for Medical Transcription (AAMT) awards the voluntary designation, Certified Medical Transcriptionist (CMT), to those who earn passing scores on written and practical examinations. As in many other fields, certification is recognized as a sign of competence. Because medical terminology is constantly evolving, medical transcriptionists are encouraged to regularly update their skills. Every 3 years, CMTs must earn continuing education credits to be recertified.

In addition to understanding medical terminology, transcriptionists must have good English grammar and punctuation skills, as well as familiarity with personal computers and word processing software. Normal hearing acuity and good listening skills also are necessary. Employers often require applicants to take pre-employment tests.

With experience, medical transcriptionists can advance to supervisory positions, home-based work, consulting, or teaching. With additional education or training, some become medical records and health information technicians, medical coders, or medical records and health information administrators.

Job Outlook

Employment of medical transcriptionists is projected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2010. Demand for medical transcription services will be spurred by a growing and aging population. Older age groups receive proportionately greater numbers of medical tests, treatments, and procedures that require documentation. A high level of demand for transcription services also will be sustained by the continued need for electronic documentation that can be easily shared among providers, third-party payers, regulators, and consumers. Growing numbers of medical transcriptionists will be needed to amend patients' records, edit for grammar, and discover discrepancies in medical records.

Advancements in speech recognition technology are not projected to significantly reduce the need for medical transcriptionists because these workers will continue to be needed to review and edit drafts for accuracy. In spite of the advances in this technology, it has been difficult for the software to grasp and analyze the human voice and the English language with all its diversity. There will continue to be a need for skilled medical transcriptionists to identify and appropriately edit the inevitable errors created by speech recognition systems, and create a final document.

Hospitals will continue to employ a large percentage of medical transcriptionists, but job growth will not be as fast as in other areas. Increasing demand for standardized records in offices and clinics of physicians should result in rapid employment growth, especially in large group practices. Job opportunities should be the best for those who earn an associate degree or certification from the American Association for Medical Transcription.

Earnings

Medical transcriptionists had median hourly earnings of \$12.15 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$10.07 and \$14.41. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$8.66, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$16.70. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical transcriptionists in 2000 were as follows:

Offices and clinics of medical doctors	\$12.25
Hospitals	12.14
Mailing, reproduction, and stenographic services	11.47

Compensation methods for medical transcriptionists vary. Some are paid based on the number of hours they work or on the number of lines they transcribe. Others receive a base pay per hour with incentives for extra production. Large hospitals and healthcare organizations usually prefer to pay for the time an employee works. Independent contractors and employees of transcription services almost always receive production-based pay.

According to a 1999 study conducted by Hay Management Consultants for the American Association for Medical Transcription, entry-level medical transcriptionists had median hourly earnings of \$10.32 and the most experienced transcriptionists had median hourly earnings of \$13.00. Earnings were highest in organizations employing 1,000 or more workers. Transcriptionists receiving production-based pay earned about 7 to 8.5 cents per Standardized Line (based on a 65-character line, counting all keystrokes). However, independent contractors—who have higher expenses than their corporate counterparts, receive no benefits, and face higher risk of termination than employed transcriptionists—typically charge about 12 to 13 cents per Standardized Line.

Related Occupations

A number of other workers type, record information, and process paperwork. Among these are court reporters, secretaries and administrative assistants, receptionists and information clerks, and human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping. Other workers who provide medical support include medical assistants and medical records and health information technicians.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on a career as a medical transcriptionist, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

► American Association for Medical Transcription, 3460 Oakdale Rd., Suite M, Modesto, CA 95355-9690. Internet: <http://www.aamt.org>

State employment service offices can provide information about job openings for medical transcriptionists.

Nursing, Psychiatric, and Home Health Aides

(O*NET 31-1011.00, 31-1012.00, 31-1013.00)

Significant Points

- Job prospects for nursing and home health aides will be very good because of fast growth and high replacement needs in these large occupations.
- Minimum education or training is generally required for entry-level jobs, but earnings are low.

Nature of the Work

Nursing and psychiatric aides help care for physically or mentally ill, injured, disabled, or infirm individuals confined to hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, and mental health settings. Home health aides duties are similar, but they work in patients' homes or residential care facilities.

Nursing aides, also known as nursing assistants, geriatric aides, unlicensed assistive personnel, or hospital attendants, perform routine tasks under the supervision of nursing and medical staff. They answer patients' call bells, deliver messages, serve meals, make beds, and help patients eat, dress, and bathe. Aides also may provide